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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the teacher in the problems basic writers experience, a study analyzed the written interaction between a teacher and basic writers, culled from a larger ethnographic study of one freshman composition class. The purpose was to characterize the mode of discourse within a communicative exchange called "theme-ing," which begins when the teacher makes the assignment and ends when the teacher evaluates the final draft of the paper. In the exchange between the students and the teacher, the teacher used a special linguistic register for the comments which shaped basic writers' revisions. Findings suggest basic writers interpret all comments by the teacher as having a strong editive directive force to "correct this mistake" and that basic writers seem less capable of learning from the revising process than do successful students. These problems can perhaps be avoided with several possible solutions: (1) teachers need to be more aware of the communicative implications of their comments and make the purposes of the comments more explicit; (2) teachers can seek alternative commenting procedures which focus not on the writer's errors but on the reader's problem(s) with the piece of writing; (3) teachers can give students fail-proof writing tasks by providing them with the criteria to be used for evaluating a piece; and (4) teachers need to share positive comments with basic writers. (Three notes are included, and four appendixes outlining the suggested procedures and 18 references are attached.) (MS)

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"What Do You Want Me to Say?" Basic Writers' Responses to Written Comments

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"What Do You Want Me to Say?"
Basic Writers' Responses to Written Comments

In just over a decade, we have learned much about basic writers. Shaughnessy examined the writing of basic writers and described the patterns of errors in their writing--from the morphological level to the discourse level. Bartholomae and Lunsford demonstrated how basic writers respond to writing assignments in rhetorically and cognitively different ways than more proficient writers. Pianko, Perl, and Sommers described the composing processes and revising strategies of basic writers and found that they rely on strategies that inhibit their writing process. Rose argued that basic writers suffer writing block because they set inappropriate or rigid rules and plans for their writing tasks. Common to these studies is the focus on the writers and their texts. No studies examine the role of the teacher in the problems basic writers have. This study focuses on the written interaction between a teacher and basic writers as evidenced in her comments and their revising responses to the comments. It is derived from a larger ethnographic study of one freshman composition class in which the written interaction between teacher and student is analyzed within classroom discourse and speech act theories (Barnes).

The oral discourse of classrooms has been studied for various purposes (Cazden; Heath). The most common purpose has been to characterize the interaction--how teachers structure the classroom talk, how students negotiate turns at talk, how different ethnic groups use alternative strategies. Several concepts from this research are useful for the study being reported here. Certain communicative events within a classroom are highly identifiable because of their consistent and regular structure. These events can be identified as communicative "exchanges." Each exchange consists of characteristic moves (language behaviors) for both the student and the teacher. These moves in turn

consist of specific speech acts (utterances which have context-specific functions) unique to each participant in the exchange. The data for the study reported below reveal that in the writing classroom two (sometimes simultaneous) modes of discourse are carried on: an oral mode and a written mode. The purpose here is to characterize the written mode within a communicative exchange called "theme-ing" which begins when the teacher makes the assignment (in this case, orally) and ends when the teacher evaluates the final draft of the paper (See Appendix I).[1] The data comprise the first drafts and the teacher's written comments on them, the students revised drafts and the teacher's written comments on them, oral interviews, and questionnaires.

In this exchange, the teacher uses a special linguistic register for her comments which shapes basic writers' revision. In order to understand how this happens, it is first necessary to characterize the exchange and to identify features of the linguistic register used by teachers in writing their comments. In ideal discourse situations, both participants share "pragmatic presuppositions" (Levinson 204). Language behaviors are said to be based on contextual presuppositions only if they are mutually known by the participants. But because of the very nature of the dominant role of the teacher in any classroom interaction, the teacher is in the position of knowing more than the student does. Students know such is the case and learn (sometimes very early in their academic careers) that their job is to tell the teacher what s/he

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[1]Winifred Horner used this term in her study of speech acts and what she called text acts in composition. Her use of the term refers to a special text act in which the student creates a theme (a text) and the teacher reads it. I extend her term "theme-ing" to include the many texts created by both a teacher and student when the student writes and revises according to the many teacher comments s/he receives on the draft(s). Thus, Horner's "theme-ing" act becomes part of the moves in a greater exchange to which I have assigned her term "theme-ing."

already knows. Thus, students believe that any comment written by the composition teacher bears some information which they should know and which the teacher already knows. Ideal discourse also adheres to a rule of cooperation: the hearer's responsibility is to do any work necessary to determine the intent of the speaker's utterance and respond accordingly (Grice).

Regardless of the syntactic form of any teacher comment (declarative, question, single-word label), student writers will interpret it as a command because they are adhering to a special rule of cooperation that any utterance is a command to do, called a "directive," only when it refers to an uncompleted action or activity which both the teacher and pupil know should have been completed (Sinclair and Coulthard 53). In the ideal writing classroom, however, not all teacher comments are correctly interpreted as "directives" because writing is a process of discovery in which the writer better knows what s/he wants to say than does the teacher. Thus, a contradictory set of pragmatic presuppositions exists: for the teacher, any comments written on a student's paper may directives, requests for information, or simply declaratives; for the student, all comments written on the their papers can only be directives. The contexts for the various intentions of the teacher's comments seem to be either ambiguous or ignored by basic writers. As will be shown, their alternative view of revision comes from continued failed interactions with the teacher because the presuppositions for the contexts never become shared.

In this study, the written comments of the teacher are classified as either "verdictives" (comments used to praise or criticize) or "directives"

(used to tell someone what to do).[2] These comments most commonly occur in the actual text, in the margins or at the end. Directives can be further divided into two subtypes according to the revision skills being suggested. The first type, named the "editive," is used when the teacher's intent is for the student to make lower-order revisions--mechanical, grammatical, lexical or syntactic changes. The second type, named the "revisional," is used when the teacher's intent is for the student to make higher-order revisions--informational, organizational holistic alterations. Either type may be direct or indirect into direct and indirect "directives." When direct, their form is the imperative; when indirect, their form can be the interrogative, the declarative or simply a word or symbol. (See Appendices II through IV for further discussion and examples.)

The basic writers of this study were so identified because they consistently earned D's and F's on their papers and had been required to take basic writing prior to taking the 101 class studied. In general, these basic writers receive more directives than verdictives; the verdictives are usually critical not praising. Furthermore, the basic writers of this study received a large number of text editives that simply correct errors like "**the boys is** " (asterisked in Appendix IV). They also tended to receive some direct revisionals like "**Be specific**" in their margins or indirect revisionals like "**You separate your thesis sentence from** 1" at the end of their papers. They

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[2] John Searle, one of the leading scholars in speech act theory, identified "directives" as one of several illocutionary acts. An illocutionary act is an utterance that performs one of several possible functions. These functions are not necessarily linked to their syntactic form. Thus, an imperative form may be an interrogative speech act or a question form may be a directive speech act. To illustrate briefly, "Give the facts, ma'am." is an imperative form that is requesting information, or "Where's your key?" spoken by a person whose arms are loaded with packages is telling someone else to open the door.

received an overwhelming proportion of editives over direct revisionals. The students see all of these as an undifferentiated set of red marks. One student in this study received 45 direct text editives compared to 7 revisionals, direct and indirect. Another student received 17 compared to 6, while still another received 14 compared to 3. Often the end comments contain editives or dispraise verdictives with which the teacher reinforces these students' notion that revising is merely editing--correcting or recopying--as when she writes, "Watch for mechanical problems."

Thus, when basic writers receive their papers from their teacher with such comments, their revision task is a complicated one. They must be able to read and interpret the register used in the comments and the intent of the comments, to re-read their compositions through the eyes of the teacher (whose view is presented in the comments), and then to try to reconcile their own intentions with the teacher's perception. Given that basic writers receive revisional directives that are sparse and vague, they naturally tend to interpret them as they do editive directives and simply to try to correct the errors. They also tend to give equal priority to editives and revisionals, rather than attending first to the revisionals and then to the editives. As is shown below, the resulting changes in the draft, whether at the syntactic or the rhetorical level, are often mechanical and literal, sometimes even resulting in a product far different from the teacher's expected outcome for the revisions. An even worse result is that the students continue to be unsuccessful writers in subsequent assignments because their view of revision as correcting is constantly rewarded and unchallenged.

An analysis of basic writers' revisions reveals that indeed they are preoccupied with errors and rules. When asked to revise, some students only

edit; their revisions fail--or are never attempted. If asked to revise again, the students try to attend to the teacher's revisionals but continue to revise as if correcting errors. The following interaction between the teacher and one female basic writer demonstrates how these students respond to revisionals as editives. The student had written an essay arguing against abortion. The teacher wrote these end comments:

> [1] Your argument needs proof--specific information, special detail, that will make the reader believe your arguments. [2] All you cite is the Bible. [3] Some would argue that the Bible will not feed or clothe unwanted and neglected children.

Statement [1] is a revisional directing the student to provide proof for her position. Statement [2] is probably meant as in indirect directive for the student to find additional sources of proof. However, the student takes it as a dispraise verdictive especially since in statement [3] the teacher seems to be striking down the student's proof. The student is left to infer that her arguments were incorrect and that the teacher has not accepted them. Predictably, this basic writer corrects the perceived mistake. In her revision, the student no longer argues that abortion is wrong; she argues that it is a matter of individual choice. She has eliminated the religious argument. Both changes make the revision more acceptable; she earns a C, her just reward for revising as if correcting.

Another basic writer in the study had received an F on her original. The teacher's comments were numerous: 1) direct editives that corrected the problem, 2) indirect revisionals like "**But--isn't the fact it [smoking] is BAD for health important?**" and 3) direct end revisionals like "**Work to organize your theme MORE LOGICALLY.**" The student revised the paper twice. First the teacher had requested only that the student revise the introduction to focus

her argument and clean up the mistakes, which the student did. The teacher rewarded this partial revision with a C. For the second revision (focusing on the rest of the paper), the student was left more on her own. This time, she revised more methodically and mechanically, as if correcting mere mechanical mistakes. Her revision can be directly linked to the teacher's comments. The students's original sentence was "The main argument [sic] on the subject of smoking, I feel is not the long dwelling of [sic] the smoker's health but the effects on others (non-smokers) due to cigarette smoking." Responding to the teacher's revisional quoted above about the health issue, the student changes her statement, "There has [sic] been continuous warnings of the effects cigarettes [sic] smoking has [sic] on the smoker's health, but a more stressful warning, I feel [sic] should be upon the effects of cigarette smoking on the non-smokers." The student has successfully maintained her own point but felt the need to incorporate the teacher's comment into the discourse.

As these two cases suggest, basic writers interpret all teacher comments as having a strong editive directive force to "correct this mistake." They make editing and revising changes as if both were to correct mistakes. The students form their assumptions for revising, ironically, from the teacher's written comments. Yet, their assumptions are not those of the teacher. That the assumptions are neither mutually shared nor known (the conditions for participants to establish pragmatic presuppositions) explains the communicative "failure" and why basic writers do not develop the competence better student writers have for writing and revising. Basic writers fail to gain this competence because of the crossed messages the teacher communicates and because of the teacher's failure to make explicit the relationship between her comments and the revision responses they should evoke.

The findings of this study suggest also that basic writers seem less capable of learning from the revising process than do successful students. They seem to view each paper as a single entity, unrelated to the other writing tasks required in the course. They seem to generate their own rules for writing only one task at a time and operate under different rules each time they write. It seems that the teacher's and student's assumptions for writing tasks are very different. That the teacher expects students to learn from paper to paper is rarely explicitly stated. The basic writers simply continue to muddle their way through each task, relying on the teacher's comments to tell them what to correct.

Since doing the original observations for this study, I have collected some interesting problems other basic writers have had with comments from different teachers. The problems point to the communication issues raised in this paper. One generalization I have arrived at is that basic writers are often willing to do more-than-necessary cooperative work to interpret comments. For example, I once wrote in an end comment, "Are there other details which would interest a reader to come visit this place?" I had intended my comment as a heuristic to help the student consider more possible observations about an amusement park in the student's hometown. Not too surprisingly, he interpreted my comment as both a dispraise verdictive and as a revisional directive telling him to eliminate his original example and replace it with a new one. Instead of meaning "additional," the word "other" had signalled "not this one" for the student. In his revision, he did exactly what he thought I had intended and corrected his mistake.Two other examples illustrate the crossed messages sent and received by basic writers. A colleague had a student who was having a difficult time organizing her composition. After two unsuccessful drafts, the

teacher wrote to the student, "Go back to the prewriting stage and outline this in order to reflect several big headings." The teacher had meant the comment to get the student to return to a planning stage and then adjust her composition according to the organization plan she discovered. In the revision, the student kept the original introduction and conclusion paragraphs intact but replaced the body of the paper with an outline of the original paper. Another example was contributed by a teacher who had written (?) between two words to indicate a missing word. When the student submitted his revised paper, he had copied the original but mechanically and "correctly" inserted (?) exactly as the teacher had written it.

In these cases, the students were basic writers and like the basic writers of this study, these students tended not to interpret the comments as they were intended. This happens frequently when statements are made which are only [+indicating] and if they are also indirect (see Appendices III and IV). As previously discussed, a rule of cooperation must be in operation for indirect statements to be interpreted as directives. In the cases described above in which the statements could also be neutral, heuristic responses, they are interpreted as both verdictives and directives-to-correct because different interpretations of the rule of cooperation seem to exist. The teacher interprets the rule as (a) I have written a comment which may inspire a revision, (b) you know it is a comment, and (c) you should show me that you know. But for the student, the principle seems to be (a) the teacher has written a comment, so something is wrong, (b) I must find the error, and (c) I must correct the error or ask the teacher what is wrong. That a teacher's comments can only be heuristic or responsive seems either too subtle for basic writers or simply not possible.

In situations in which revision is not assigned, how communicative are such comments if these conflicting views operate? Because basic writers believe that our purpose in writing numerous editives and revisionals is to signal what they did wrong, we need to be more ware of the communicative implications of our comments and make he purposes for our comments more explicit. The most radical solution is to abandon commenting altogether and turn to conferencing, whether for revision or for evaluation. As teachers who do this already know, conferencing provides students opportunities to recycle missed/mixed messages. Conferencing affords writing teachers the same opportunities by allowing us to focus on the revision needs of a paper in a less correcting way and to observe students' responses and reactions. We can be attuned for the ever-present question "What do you want me to say?" from students and provide alternative questions like "What do you want to say?"

Less radical suggestions for improving our commenting practices come from several students interviewed during the study. They believe that the teacher should give ways to elaborate their thoughts. Instead of writing "**give more details,**" a teacher could show which details are needed and how to put them into the paper. This could be demonstrated for the whole class by simply duplicating a paper onto an overhead projector transparency. The teacher can comment on the paper as she would if writing her comments and then explain what the comments mean. Then she could guide students in finding ways to revise the paper in line with her comments' implications. The teacher should write the students' suggestions onto the transparency and help students fit the ideas into the original paper. By explicitly showing basic writers what her comments mean and offering them alternative strategies for revising, perhaps the teacher can instill a more successful notion of revising and help basic writers stop

"correcting" their papers when revising.

Another solution might be for teachers to seek alternative commenting procedures which focus not on the writer's errors but on the reader's problem(s) with the piece of writing. These kinds of comments might help bring students to stop looking for mistakes and instead start looking for ways to make the papers more readable. A comment like "I need to have some examples of what you mean to confirm my understanding that ..." helps a student know what is (not) understood and what is needed and why.[3]

Another solution is to give students fail-proof writing tasks by providing them with the criteria to be used for evaluating a piece in order to eliminate some puzzles for the students as they try to "guess" what we want and to reduce the number of surprises when we comment on their papers. This is not to suggest that teachers lay down rigid rules--include five paragraphs; have a topic sentence at the head of each paragraph, etc. These criteria should be reader-based to reinforce the student's role in a communicative act. The criteria should build knowledge from paper to paper to reinforce the way we expect students to transfer skills. For example, instead of requiring a thesis, the teacher might explain to students that the reader needs to be told what to expect.

Finally, teachers need to share positive comments with basic writers, who may be error-oriented because they never receive praise. Basic writers complained in interviews during the study that they never know what they have done right, only what they have done wrong. By explicitly pointing out successful strategies or choices, we may help basic writers cease asking, "What

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[3]Teachers can find some additional insights that may help to reshape the content and intent of their comments in the articles written on the subject by Knoblauch and Brannon, Sommers, and Zamel.

do you want me to say?" and begin saying, "Here's what I want say."

Appendix I

The Theme-ing Exchange[4]

STUDENT MOVES	TEXTS	TEACHER MOVES
		teacher makes assignment
		MOVE 1
student writes essay	student's essay	teacher reads essay
MOVE 2	TEXT 1	MOVE 3a
student reads essay & comments	comments	teacher writes comments on essay
MOVE 4a	TEXT 2	MOVE 3b
student rewrites essay	revised essay	teacher reads revised essay
MOVE 4b	TEXT 3	MOVE 5a
	final comments and evaluation	teacher writes final comments & assigns grade
	TEXT 4	MOVE 5b

[4]Horner's scheme for "theme-ing" includes only Moves 2 and 3a and Text 1. Instead of viewing these as moves, she identifies simultaneous interactions of reading and writing which I have elected to identify as separate moves. For my purposes in this paper, I have simplified my own scheme. Interested readers are urged to refer to both Horner's and my dissertations for fuller theoretical discussions of theme-ing in order to compare our models.

Appendix II

Speech Acts in Written Comments

I. Directives: These speech acts have as their goal to get the student to do something.

A. Editives: so named for their focus on lower order revision skills like proofreading, lexical substitutions, syntactic changes. These speech acts occur most frequently when the teacher marks the text itself.

Examples:

Direct: has e or ".

Indirect: *Do these pronouns say the same thing?*

B. Revisionals: so named for their focus on higher order revisions like organizational, informational or different holistic alterations. These speech acts apear in both the text, especially in the margins, and in the end comments.

Examples:

Direct: *Give an example.* *Take out.*

Indirect: *Why not bring this down to a more personal level?*

II. Verdictives: These speech acts usually appear at the end of a paper. Their goal is to provide an evaluation of something or the whole paper.

A. Praise: Tend to be written only on successful papers. Basic writers rarely receive these.

Example:

Good work.

B. Dispraise: Tend to be used to point out the general flaw. Sometimes used in the margins when something is ineffective.

Examples:

This is brief. *You have no thesis.*

C. Grade: Perhaps the most powerful of the three verdictives. The teacher and student work to accomplish the power of this act.

Appendix III

Distinctive Features for Comments

I. ± *Indicating*--This feature describes a comment which serves to point out an unspecified problem. A comment with this feature is usually a symbol like _____, ?, ʃ, [ ], or the word *awkward*.

II. ± *Locating*--This feature names the function of a circle ◯, an underline _____, [ ], or other marks as well as verbal markers like *this*, *first*, etc., which direct the student to a specific problem.

III. ± *Naming*--This feature includes any comment in which the teacher uses the metalanguage of composition. It includes abbreviations like *CS*, *SP*, *P*, or *C*, the symbol ⋕, and phrases like *dangling modifier*, *verb tense*, *word form*, *topic sentence*. These are the traditional terms used by composition teachers to indicate a problem or to talk about writing.

IV. ± *Correcting*--This features is used to correct verb endings in cases of subject-verb disagreement, to change the working of a phrase, to write the correct punctuation mark or to use simply a symbol which makes the correction. Basic writers receive a disproportionately large number.

V. ± *Rule-giving*--This feature describes a comment in which the teacher offers the student an explanation or rule for the error committed. Basic writers rarely receive such comments.

Appendix IV

Sample Comments Specified

PLACE	COMMENT	Indicating	locating	naming	correcting	rule-giving
end rev.	still some problems	-	-	-	-	-
text ed.	housewives	+	+	-	-	-
end rev.	logic needs word @ start	+	+	-	-	-
end ed.	watch out for mechanics	-	-	+	-	-
end rev.	work to organize your theme MORE LOCICALLY	-	-	-	-	+
text rev.	topic sentence does not apply to what follows	+	+	+	-	-
text ed.	people....shows	+	+	+	-	-
text rev.	Still--not typical-BUT German measles would be!	+	+	-	+	-
*text ed.	as well as the	+	+	-	+	-
*text ed.	"	+	+	+	+	-
text ed.	". Period is always inside	+	+	+	-	+
text rev.	Where's the thesis?	+	-	+	-	-
text ed.	60 Write out	+	+	-	-	+
text ed.	(:) Introduces a list	+	+	-	+	+
text ed. or rev.	]	+	-	-	-	-

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